

A possible new species of Scops Owl *Otus* sp on Réunion?

Eric Renman

During a visit to Réunion in October-November 1993, I was fortunate enough to see, in addition to the known endemic vertebrates of the island, something completely unknown to me. On the evening of 30 October 1993 in montane forest an owl-like creature appeared.

The observations were made at a picnic site about 500 m below the gîte at Plaine d’Affouches (where road RF 20 ends). The site is partly hidden in a stand of introduced Japanese Red Cedar *Cryptomeria japonica* and very close to an area of native forest. I ate alone at the site at dusk and then, at about 20.00hr, I suddenly heard a scops owl-like sound *kraaoo*, similar to that of African Scops Owl *Otus (scops) senegalensis*. However, it was louder, more drawn out and a little more metallic. Half a minute later it was heard once more and I was now convinced that it was a kind of scops owl. I moved slowly towards the tree from where the sound was coming. Unfortunately, I had no flash on my camera and no torch within easy reach. When I approached I saw a flying silhouette of a small owl-like bird disappearing without a sound westwards into the native forest. There was a full moon that night. I did not hear it any more during the night despite sleeping out at the picnic site, nor could I find it the following morning.

What could it have been? There are no records of any scops owl - nor indeed of any owl species - on Réunion. I have, unfortunately, never heard a tape recording of Madagascar Scops Owl *Otus rutilus*, which might be expected to be the nearest relative of a ‘Réunion Scops Owl’. Nor am I familiar with the calls of Seychelles *O. magicus*, Anjouan *O. capnodes*, Karthala *O. pauliani* or Pemba Scops Owls *O. pembaensis*; only those of African and Sokoke Scops Owl *O. ireneae* are known to me.

What is the probability of a ‘Réunion Scops Owl’? There are large areas of undisturbed native forest in the north and east of Réunion. The area I visited is well-frequented by visitors, but other parts have not been opened up by the cutting of roads or tracks. The native forest itself is almost impenetrable, both for botanical and topographic reasons. There would seem to be

plenty of potential food available at the site as Réunion Olive White-eye *Zosterops olivaceus*, Grey White-eye *Z. borbonicus* and Réunion Stone-Chat *Saxicola tectes* were common there, together with a few not so common species.

None of the few French and German tourists I encountered during my nine-day stay showed any interest in birds, nor did any of the local people. The rare birding groups from abroad probably stay in hotels in St Denis and thus miss nocturnal animals. It is possible, therefore, that the forests of Réunion do hold an unknown scops owl. However, if the bird I saw was a scops owl it might have been an escape. Escape or not, I suggest birders visiting Réunion keep an eye open! ☺



Madagascar Scops Owl *Otus rutilus*
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Editorial note: On the face of it the discovery of a scops owl on Réunion would be a surprise. None has ever been reported, either by early visitors or by the thousands of poachers who used to extract tree-roosting fruit bats from their holes. In a comparable situation on Anjouan, Anjouan Scops Owl, though very rare, is known to almost every villager. There is sub-fossil evidence of an owl on Réunion but it is not that of a Scops. On the other hand, there are sub-fossil remains of two owl species, one an *Otus* sp, from Mauritius so it would be odd if a Scops had never occurred on Réunion. Also, as Eric Renman makes clear, few people camp out in likely places. The editors are grateful to Roger Safford for these comments.